Mapuche Poetry and Protest in Southern Chile

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In the spring of 2011, I was awarded a partial Latin American Studies Research Grant and a Koelln Fund Mini Grant for Student Research for my investigation of Mapuche poetry within the context of modern Chilean identity. The Mapuche are Chile’s most prominent indigenous group, and are famous for having resisted Spanish conquest and maintained an independent territory until Chilean independence in 1810. Chileans have always celebrated the Mapuche as a national symbol of independence and belonging, but only by way of idealized heroes and ancient legends. Historically, the perception of the Mapuche as a relic has also inhabited the realm of Chilean poetry—another source of national pride—but only as part of the Chilean landscape, or part of an abstract understanding of “chilenidad”, the essence of being Chilean. Non-indigenous poets have often neglected the Mapuche voice itself as a living, evolving culture that includes a language and history not shared by their European compatriots/conquerors. I believe this is a result of a national obsession with “modernity,” which leads Chileans to blame poverty of present-day indigenous populations on their “backwards” cultures and resistance to change, or leads Chileans to ignore the continued existence of indigenous cultures altogether. Ironically, though, the most celebrated new voices within Chilean poetry are Mapuche, and have received national and international acclaim through their bilingual publications that speak bitterly of territorial and cultural displacement. For my research, I plan to return to southern Chile, the heart of the territorial and cultural conflict, to meet with academics of the Universidad de La Frontera, their Center for Indigenous Studies and their extensive library, and perhaps meet with the emerging generation of Mapuche poets, or even indigenous community leaders. The hope is to enrich my understanding of the poetry by expanding my anthropological knowledge of Mapuche culture, and try to determine the political ends of this poetry—its place in the struggle for ancestral land recuperation, and its role as a tool of assimilation or emancipation for a maturing Mapuche subculture.

Because of an existing commitment this summer to intern as a
Preston Public Interest Fellow with Compas de Nicaragua, a small grass-roots organization in Central America, my “field” research in southern Chile was postponed to January, 2012, following an independent study this coming semester under my advisor, Enrique Yepes. Accordingly, the grant monies from this fiscal year were dedicated to booking the flight and preemptively purchasing publications for my study, including such titles as UL: Four Mapuche Poets, edited by Cecelia Vacuna, and 20 poetas mapuche temporaneos/Epu mari ulkatufë ta fachantu., selected and edited by acclaimed Mapuche poet Jaime L. Huenun. I was also sent away from Maine this spring with various articles discussing the manifestation of Mapuche activism in ecological conservation in Patagonia and intercultural medicine in the Chilean health system. The plan was to make use of my free time in Nicaragua by familiarizing myself with the recent history of the Mapuche conflict, and the texts of some of the most recognized Mapuche poets of the last decade, building a base for my pending independent study, my research trip, and eventually, my honors project in Latin American Studies next spring.

Over the past ten weeks, though, Nicaragua has proven to be an unexpectedly excellent site for this initial research. This country is described as a “Nation of Poets,” much like Chile, and has experienced literary exchange with Chile over the centuries through celebrated figures such as Ruben Dario. Therefore, when Nicaraguan colleagues and host families ask about the books I’m reading, I find myself sharing and discussing the poems with them, but also explaining what I have learned thus far about Chilean race dynamics, class struggles, Mapuche assimilation and resistance, and Chile’s long love affair with all things lyrical. Most of my Nicaraguan acquaintances and the target beneficiaries of Compas’ work belong to urban slums or rural subsistence farming communities. These two spheres compose the Nicaraguan popular class, who tend to identify with distant Nauhuatl and Maya ancestry, often times referred to and understood as a generic ethnicity of “indio”. Correspondingly, conversations about my research often expand to legends of indigenous resistance in Nicaragua, and general awe that Chileans may be so quick to deny, rather than cherish, their living indigenous heritage. At the same time, the narrative of
conquest, discrimination, and dominance by a whiter, more European aristocracy rings true for many Nicaraguans. Additionally, Nicaragua shares a connection with distant Chile due to a shared recent history of military dictatorships, socialist governments and U.S. intervention. This surprising feeling of proximity to a country so geographically distant speaks to Latin Americanity as not only a historical or intellectual construction, but rather a living mentality expressed even on the popular levels of society; I think the common colonial history and language, which now allows a transcontinental circulation of Latin American literature, plays a large role in this perceived solidarity. Thus, my continuous experience and exposure in Nicaragua, although not considered official research, has been extremely informative, and crucial in placing my continuing study of Mapuche poetry and protest within the larger narrative of Latin American history, commonality, and identity.

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